

INTRODUCING THE WESLEYAN THEOLOGICAL TRADITION

The many churches of the Wesleyan family, spread around the globe, trace their roots to an eighteenth-century movement of spiritual renewal within the Church of England led by John and Charles Wesley. The Wesley brothers typically rejected attempts to define their “Methodist” movement by its distinctive doctrines, emphasizing instead a distinctive concern for spiritual life (as in their 1743 tract *The Character of a Methodist*). This has sometimes been cited as evidence that they dismissed the value of doctrinal convictions or of engaging in theological instruction and debate. Nothing could be further from the truth! Indeed, when John Wesley capped his long ministry with a set of “Thoughts upon Methodism” in 1786, his primary exhortation was for Methodists to keep central “the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.”

This interconnection of doctrine, spiritual vitality, and disciplines/practices of Christian life is at the heart of Wesleyanism.* In downplaying *distinctive* doctrines, the Wesley brothers were emphasizing their concurrence with the *core* Christian doctrines handed down through the ages and affirmed in the Articles of Religion of the Church of England. This included a clear endorsement of the primacy of scripture for theological reflection, combined with the Anglican appreciation for the insights of tradition, reason, and experience in interpreting scripture. The brothers also embraced the Anglican conviction that the most important forms of doctrinal expression are those that directly impact all believers—sermons, liturgies, hymns, catechisms, and the like. They devoted their lives to gifting the Wesleyan tradition with such materials.

While insisting on the breadth of what they shared with their Anglican peers (and the historic church), the Wesley brothers admitted that they placed special emphasis upon some traditional doctrines, because of their connection to spiritual vitality and Christian practice.

The doctrinal area that the Wesleys highlighted most often was soteriology (the nature of salvation). Their concern was to maintain a balanced understanding of the human problem and of God’s saving response. On one front this meant defending the universal reality of spiritual need, in the face of idealized accounts

* For more detail and documentation of the following summary, see Randy L. Maddox, “Theology of John and Charles Wesley,” in Charles Yrigoyen, Jr., ed., *T&T Clark Companion to Methodism* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 20–35.

of human nature by some Enlightenment thinkers. John's *Doctrine of Original Sin* (1757) was devoted to this concern, demonstrating the shared human experience of spiritual infirmity and bondage.

Turning the focus around, the Wesleys were equally concerned to reject depictions of depravity as the final word about humanity. Convinced that "God's mercy is over all God's works" (Ps. 145:9), they insisted that God reaches out in love to *all* persons in their fallen condition. Through that encounter, which they termed "prevenient grace," God awakens sufficient awareness and upholds sufficient ability to respond that we can *either* embrace God's deeper saving work in our lives *or* culpably resist it.

This brings us to the dominant Wesleyan soteriological concern—countering the tendency of many to restrict the present benefits of salvation largely to forensic justification. Both John and Charles placed *sanctification* at the center of God's saving work, valuing justification as the doorway into this larger focus. They called their Methodist followers to "holiness of heart and life" nurtured in the full range of the means of grace.

Given the coherence of the Christian worldview, these focal concerns in soteriology were reflected in characteristic emphases within the other loci of theology. For example, both John and Charles rejected any model of predestination that assumed limited atonement and unconditional reprobation (where some are never offered a real chance of salvation). Likewise, they both emphasized valuing Christ "in all his offices"—not just as the priest who atones for guilt, but also as the prophet who teaches the ways in which we are to live, and as the king who oversees the restoration of wholeness in our lives.

These and other emphases of the Wesley brothers have left an impact on their heirs. They have also made a significant contribution to the broader church. To cite just one example, the Wesleys focused more attention on the work of the Holy Spirit than had been common through much of the history of the Western church. This emphasis, continuing through their Wesleyan heirs, played a significant role in the renewal of fully Trinitarian theology in recent decades.

Its heritage places Wesleyan theology in a particularly favorable position in the twenty-first century. It has rich theological and practical resources for ministry in a postmodern world. We may note some of these.

1. Wesleyanism's emphasis on soteriology, undergirded by a rich doctrine of prevenient grace, offers constructive ways to address the growing awareness of religious diversity globalization has fostered.

2. The Wesleyan commitment to a "catholic spirit" allows multiple interpretations of nonessential doctrines. It can help Christ's church avoid unnecessary theological polarization, even while remaining faithful to the historic Christian faith. John Wesley can teach us that love must buffer our differences and that Christian communion is sacred and indispensable.

3. The Wesleyan emphasis on “warmhearted” spirituality can provide spirit *and* structure for an experientially hungry postmodern generation.

4. The Wesleyan emphasis on sanctification, grounded in optimism regarding God’s grace, offers hope for the transformation of individuals and Christian community. Optimism regarding transforming grace extends to social structures as well. Through the power of the Holy spirit, Wesleyan theology can inspire incarnational and missional ministry in society.

5. The Wesleyan call to a holy live lives and breathes in all cultural and historical contexts. It is no dependent upon any philosophical, economic, or political system. Its vision of Christian faith and practice remains pertinent as the world shifts from a modern to a postmodern cast of spirit.

6. A driving and relentless compassion for the poor and dispossessed distinguished John and Charles Wesley’s ministry and understanding of the gospel. For them, the gospel and the dispossessed were inseparable. When true to their heritage, Wesleyans will proclaim and live the gospel as good news to all those whom structures of privilege would leave behind.

John Wesley’s exhortation to his twenty-first century descendants would surely be the same as it was for his Methodist people in 1786: that we keep central the “doctrine, spirit, and discipline” of the movement. He would encourage us to this task, not so much to *distinguish* ourselves from other Christian traditions but so that we might *share* the characteristic wisdom of our tradition with our people and with the broader church. My prayer is that this volume will prove a helpful resource to this end.

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